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C O N F I D E N T I A L ZAGREB 000590

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SR](#) [HR](#)
SUBJECT: USG REHABILITATING MASS MURDERER? - AMBASSADOR
GETS BOTH BARRELS OVER MIHAILOVIC MEDAL

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph Frank for reasons 1.5 (b) & (d)

1. (U) This is an action request. Please see para 4.

2. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: Both President Stjepan Mesic and PM Ivo Sanader have called in Ambassador Frank in the past 24 hours to express grave concern over press reports of a planned U.S. presentation of the Legion of Merit (LoM) medal awarded posthumously to Draza Mihailovic, leader of the WWII Serbian Chetnik Movement. Referring in separate meetings to the Chetnik Movement's involvement in mass killings of non-Serbians and documented collaboration with Nazi forces, Mesic and Sanader each warned that presentation of the LoM would cause major problems in the region. The USG will redefine history and rehabilitate Mihailovic with the LoM, they said, feeding the fires of nationalism in both Serbia and Croatia. Both hoped the USG, which has played a key role in establishing and maintaining peace in the region for the past 10 years, would recognize the dangers of reviving the ghosts of the past.

3. (C) Resurrection of this issue now only threatens Sanader's efforts to manage the hard right wing of his party and undermines the significant efforts of both Mesic and Sanader to acknowledge and close the fascist chapter in Croatian history. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

4. (C) ACTION REQUEST: Post requests that the Department seriously revisit the costs and benefits of delivering the Mihailovic LoM, weighing carefully the advantages to the USG, if any, against definite negative repercussions for political stability in the region. END ACTION REQUEST.

TATTOO TROUBLE: EXTREME SENSITIVITY OVER MIHAILOVIC

5. (C) Croatians believe the Serbian occupation of Croatia during the 91-95 war was based on Chetnik principles) turning 60-year-old scars into open wounds. For the GoC, veneration of the Chetnik leader cuts close to the bone. In November 2004, the Ministry of Interior banned Serbian basketball player Milan Gurovic from entering the country, describing his upper-arm tattoo of Mihailovic as hate speech. Two Serbian students were later convicted of "insulting public morality" after displaying a Mihailovic picture on Zagreb's main square in reaction to the ban.

6. (C) Sanader, who has taken significant political risk to remove monuments to members of Croatia's own WWII fascist regime, clearly fears the likely response to the Mihailovic LoM from the right wing, both within and outside his party. Parliament had scheduled a debate this week on the Mihailovic medal, threatening to escalate rhetoric on the issue, but the PM told the Ambassador that he personally intervened and directed President of Parliament Vladimir Seks to remove it from the agenda and to adjourn until after local elections on May 15, by which time he hopes this issue will be closed.

RARE UNITED FRONT FROM PRESIDENT AND PM

7. (C) Sanader carefully coordinated his demarche with Mesic and the two used many of the same talking points, a telling sign that these traditional rivals consider this an extremely dangerous issue. Both asked why the medal had to be presented now, calling it a bad choice to mark the tenth anniversary of the Dayton Agreement and a threat to Croatian efforts to end all glorification of fascism.

FRANK

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